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EXPERIENCES OF COACHING IN TEAM LEARNING

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper provides empirical evidence of the supportive role of coaching in supporting team learning and professional development in conjunction with other factors including learning environment, content and methods. The context of this paper is a bespoke vocational university course for frontline family support workers.

Design/methodology/approach: This paper is informed by a social constructionist view of coaching and adult learning. Data were collected through six qualitative in-depth interviews and one group interview with course participants and were interpreted using thematic analysis.

Findings: Course participants identified the coaching element of the course, the learning environment, course content and varied teaching and learning methods as the main elements supporting their learning. The course has enabled them to develop on both personal and team level in their daily work and to achieve superior performance.

Research implications: More research into the role of coaching to facilitate team learning of frontline employees from different organizational settings is required.

Practical implications: Adult educators designing bespoke university courses need to consider the inclusion of coaching to enhance team learning and other opportunities for advanced personal and professional development.

Originality/value: The research reported in the paper focuses on the role of coaching to enhance team learning in a multi-disciplinary team of family support workers.

Key words: adult learning, coaching, professional development, team learning, transformation, vocational course

Paper type: research paper

EXPERIENCES OF COACHING IN TEAM LEARNING

Introduction

This paper sets out to determine what role coaching has in facilitating work-based learning and, in particular, team development among frontline staff. Coaching has long been a popular means of management development, particularly at executive level (Chapman 2003; Wilson 2007) because of its power to transform an individual's performance in the workplace. One of the main reasons is that coaching challenges individuals to address their emotional and relationship capacity (Fillery-Travis and Lane 2007, Kauffman 2008) as an important competency en route to management and executive positions.

Yet, comparatively little is known about how coaching might benefit the development of frontline staff despite evidence in the literature that coaching interventions typically lead to a positive and lasting effect on an individual's work. The reasons for this are two-fold. Firstly, coaching allows the individual to understand the filters through which they interpret and judge events (De Haan and Burger 2005) and secondly, allows in the individual to recognize their thinking, values and beliefs, to change their cognition and to consequently change their behaviour as and when required (Skiffington and Zeuss 2003).

This paper seeks to address the gap in the current understanding of what role coaching in vocational education aimed at frontline staff. It is derived from qualitative and inductive research into a bespoke vocational university course that utilized coaching to support students' learning. The course was specifically designed for the children's services department of a local authority in North-East England that

introduced a new, interdisciplinary team of family support workers to assist the most deprived families in the local area. The objectives for the six-month course were twofold: firstly, to help the team bond quickly and effectively (team development) and secondly, to give the individual team members new skills to support their daily work and professional development.

The underlying assumption of the course was that only an effective individual can be an effective team player, and therefore the emphasis was on providing a shared learning experience for all team members (see Lave and Wenger 1991) while giving individuals the opportunity to address their own development needs through coaching (Gibb 2008). Each course participant received three two-hour coaching sessions from an experienced and qualified coach. The coaches were practicing coaches (not academics associated with the course in any other way), and the coaching sessions took place in various locations deemed conducive to the needs of the individual coachee. The focus of the coaching was on the personal and professional development of the individual and the contribution they were able to make to the overall performance of the team.

Attention was also given to the contextual nature of learning (Merriam *et al.* 2007) and the need to create a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) among course participants to enable them to fulfil the goals of their team. The context of learning (in our case at a nearby university) had a positive impact on the participants' engagement with the course content. Our analysis suggests further that the experience of coaching on the course increased participants' self-awareness and reflective ability which in turn allowed them to enhance their overall learning.

This paper reports on the findings of the research that followed this course. The research sought to understand the impact of the course on participants, particularly with regard to its two central aims of (1) team development and (2) personal developmental. The findings suggest that there are four elements related to the course that enabled the team to bond quickly and effectively, to support each other in often difficult work situations and to improve their performance. These four inter-related elements include 1) coaching, 2) environment, 3) course content, and 4) teaching and learning methods. Collectively these four elements created a powerful learning context, which was enhanced by the coaching element of the course. The conclusion of this paper is that the course enabled participants to learn individually, to learn as a team, and to relate their learning on the course to their professional practice. In designing the course, the programme leader took into account the suggestions by Merriam *et al.* (2007, p85) that 'adult students are able to participate in the diagnosis of their learning needs, the planning and implementation of the learning experience and evaluation of those experiences'. This created a partnership between the learners and the programme leader, which helped to break down some of the barriers to learning by those who have not participated in higher education before.

Literature review

Coaching has its roots in disciplines as diverse as education, psychology, sports coaching and organisational development, and consequently a wide variety of approaches to coaching have been developed. At present there is neither a clear definition of coaching (Downey 2003, Bachkirova 2007) nor a clearly defined body of

knowledge associated with it. While the lack of a standardised approach to coaching allows coaches to adapt their style to the needs of the coachee, the lack of evidence-based research and a widely accepted code of practice makes critical commentators wonder if coaching is nothing more than a socially acceptable form of therapy (e.g. Grant 2007).

Irrespective of such criticism, there is a shared assumption that coaching contributes to the personal and professional development of the individual (e.g. Downey 2003). In Hargrove's (1995, pvii) words, coaching is 'unleashing the human spirit and helping people learn powerful lessons in personal change as well as expand their capacity for action'. This, in turn, is expected to positively influence the development of the organization in which s/he works (Cox *et al.* 2010). Hence, the majority of coaching currently takes place in an organizational context (Garvey *et al.* 2009) building on the assumption that learning and development of individuals result in performance improvement, personal growth and change (Bluckert 2005).

There is an emergent interest in examining the ways in which adult learning theories underpin the theory and practice of coaching (Cox *et al.* 2010). In particular, both theories of transformational coaching and theories of transformational adult learning focus on the construction of new knowledge, skills, understanding and meaning (Cox 2006). The notion of transformation refers to 'a deep, fundamental revision to our beliefs, principles and feelings' (Cox *et al.* 2010, p8) which allow the learner to modify their understanding of themselves and others as well as their sense of possibilities (Mezirow 1991). Such self-knowledge can be achieved through critical reflection, something that Dirkx *et al.* (2007) call 'soul work', i.e. the integration of

learning, the learner's identity, sense of self and own subjectivity. Coaching has a key role in supporting such learning (Garvey *et al.* 2009).

Fundamental of this understanding of adult learning and coaching is the role of both reflection and social interaction between the learner and the wider learning environment (Vygotsky 1978). In such a learning environment, knowledge is socially constructed in collaboration with fellow learners and teachers/facilitators/coaches. It is a process that encourages the questioning of established ideas through dialogue within a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) and that embraces the value of tacit and personal knowledge held by the learner (Brockbank and McGill 1998). This implies that learning is very personal and depends on the individual's motivation to learn, develop and grow personally and professionally. Of particular importance in vocational education is the translation of new knowledge and skills into professional practice (see Robotham 2004). Adult learners create meaning from their experiences and adapt these meanings to new developments through critical reflection (Mezirow 1991).

However, coaching seems to go beyond what theories of adult education can offer. New knowledge and skills need to be grounded in self-awareness if they are to be sustained (Silsbee 2008), and coaching provides a vehicle through which the individual is able to reflect on his/her own actions and thoughts for the purpose of alternative ways of being and behaving (De Haan and Burger 2005, Garvey *et al.* 2009). While reflection is also central to adult learning (Fenwick 2008), coaching enables the learner / coachee to link any new knowledge and skills to their

professional practice through deep reflection and allows him/her to grow (Kemp 2008).

Research Methodology

This paper is underpinned by a subjectivist perspective which assumes that social realities like learning and professional development are fundamentally different from natural phenomena (Grix 2002). The social world of the coachee or learning is therefore understood as being continuously constructed, reproduced and transformed through interaction with others (Bruner 1991; Burr 1995).

The research from which this paper derives was social constructionist (Berger and Luckmann 1966) with a focus on how social reality is constructed through the stories that participants tell (Bruner 1991). A particular focus was on how participants assign meaning to (or make sense of, Weick 1995) their experiences on the course and their client work. The interview profile consisted of six team members and their manager who participated in the course and who continued to work in the children's services department to examine what, if any, difference their studies on the course have made to themselves, to the team and to their approach to client work. The interview sample did not include two team members who left the department and several new team members who joined the team after the course had been completed. The interview profile consisted of three men and four women aged between 30 and 50.

Each team member (including their manager) was interviewed individually at their workplace six months after the end of the course to harness the retrospective power

of sense-making and reflection (Weick 1995). The largely unstructured interviews lasted between 45 and 65 minutes with an average of around 50 minutes, and interviewees were encouraged to tell about their experiences with the course and their work with client families. The seven individual interviewees came together for a group interview, in which a higher-level manager from the children's services department also participated. The interviews focused on the learning of the participants and the impact it has had on the wider working environment (i.e. team, organization and approach to client work).

The interviews were voice recorded and transcribed before being analyzed in a process that borrows elements from grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and analytic induction (Denzin 1989). Analysis involved coding of data and comparing the data to detect patterns of meaning as advocated in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967).; This process was informed by the literature discussed in the previous section as part of analytic induction (Denzin 1989). The authors met repeatedly to discuss findings, and this paper is a joint effort. All names have been changed to protect the identity of both the local authority and the participants.

The small sample of seven interviewees could be perceived as a weakness of this research. However, this sample is in effect the total population for this study as only team members still working in the department and only those working in the department who had studied on the course were deemed appropriate candidates. It is not unusual for bespoke courses to be small, and it is appreciated that a larger sample may have produced more varied responses. Nevertheless, the findings offer novel insights into the role of coaching to transform both personal and individual

learning in a bespoke university course for frontline staff – insights that have wider applicability as discussed below.

Key Findings

Participants highlighted the importance of a shared learning experience that led them to bond (team development) and build a network of support and encouragement similar to the concept of ‘supervision’ that is widely used among psychologists. Such shared learning in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) allowed the team members to negotiate a common purpose for what is known as ‘the STEP team’ in the local authority. Their shared learning has increased their motivation which is paid off by superior performance. Being a member of the STEP team is like a badge of honour in the local authority in question, and participants attribute this partly to the course. There appears to be an inter-relationship between the following four main elements of the course.

- 1) Coaching (both the discussion of theories and tools and the experience of being coached by a professional coach).
- 2) learning environment (i.e. joint travel to and from university and the neutral space provided by the university setting),
- 3) course content (i.e. the theories, tools and techniques discussed as part of the course), and
- 4) teaching and learning methods (which included group work, personal development planning and reflective learning).

This causal map as constructed by the research participants is graphically represented in Figure 1 below.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

These four elements, according to our research participants, resulted in shared experiences of learning and coaching, which led to bonding among team members, support and encouragement during their daily struggles, increased motivation to work hard, and finally to the superior performance for which they have become renowned in their department and beyond.

The significance of this causal map becomes clear when listening to the recollections of the state of the 'team' at the beginning of the course shared by the participants. The team had been newly formed, team members did not have a dedicated office and, in the words of one participant, 'I don't think we were a team, to be honest.' However, the course provided them with an opportunity 'to struggle together' as another participant described their studies and work while stressing that it was an enjoyable experience. This resonates with the concept of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) which involves shared ideas, memories and commitments. The following sections will analyze and discuss each of the four elements of team learning in turn.

Coaching

While a popular management development tool (Grant 2007, Wilson 2007), coaching is rarely found in courses for frontline staff. Yet, if it helps to develop managers, what reason is there to assume that it would not also develop frontline staff? The use of coaching on this course was two-fold. Firstly, it included an introduction to coaching theories and tools, seeking to equip participants with new ways of approaching their client work, and secondly, the opportunity for participants to have a number of coaching sessions with a professional coach. It was assumed that the experience of being coached would provide participants with an idea of how effective coaching can be and to take more of a coaching role with their clients.

The social services system in the United Kingdom is often perceived by those working in it as restrictive and lacking effectiveness. The children's services department that contracted the course wanted to tackle deprivation among children differently, with a longer-lasting approach. The idea was to make clients aware of how their lives may be perceived by outsiders and society in general and to give them the support they need to change their lives for the better if they wish to do so. The STEP team was supposed to be hands-on and work much more flexibly than other services in the local authority. From its inception the philosophy of the STEP team, therefore, shared many assumptions with transformational coaching as discussed above. Manager Nina reflected on the team's knowledge of coaching theory:

I think [coaching] was about [the team] realizing that sometimes in the work that we do it's very easy to sit and tell people what we think they should be doing and how they should be doing it.

What the coaching did was make [the team] appreciate more how important it is that their role is certainly about listening but also [about] getting that person to set their own goals about what they should be doing and not you saying that I think that you should do this by next week. It's talking it through with [the client] and getting them to come up with the solution, as opposed to [the team] ... telling that parent what they think the solution is to their problems or what we've thought as their problems.

Nina's account focuses on the difficulties that her team is facing in their daily work: interaction with clients who perceive the world and 'their problems' very differently from outsiders and would tackle them very differently (if at all), too. Knowledge of coaching theory has allowed team members to listen to their client families more acutely and to find ways of resolving their problems in a more client-focused way.

Team members confirmed Nina's analysis and acknowledged that their approach to client work has changed since studying on the course. They described that they step back more often and let clients take responsibility for their own actions rather than 'sorting things out for them'. Peter puts this as follows:

I found that it was a course which very much delivered practical kind of skills, on how to better yourself, whether that be within a work setting professionally, or indeed in your own personal life.

It started to provide us with the tools that systematically got you to look at whatever those areas were and how to improve things or benefit from this. And I've found that I've used it again in lots of different settings.

Peter focuses on the practical nature of the course and the applicability of coaching tools and techniques to his daily work, and in the following account Ivan reflects on how his approach to advising client families had changed since studying on the course:

Basically, simplifying things when you're faced with an issue. You know, beforehand I would think, "oh I've got this issue" and I would have maybe five or six different ways I could about addressing it. You know, sometimes you get lost in the mire, don't you, you get too lost in your thoughts and end up doing nothing. Now I've got two or three options, "right this is the issue, what are the options and what's the best one to take", so it's more clarity, a more efficient way of working.

Ivan's account contrasts his previous experiences of getting overwhelmed with different options with a new and more analytic approach. It suggests that both his self-awareness and reflective capacity have improved to allow him to be more focused on the most promising options and making better decisions on how to proceed with a particular client family. There is widespread agreement among team members that gaining knowledge of coaching as well as tools and techniques during

the course allowed team members to approach their daily work differently. They are now able to analyze a situation and develop potential solutions, evaluating them before putting them to their client families for discussion and adoption. The team's results are much better than with other teams and agencies, and they collectively attribute it to the use of coaching tools and techniques.

Participants found the experience of being coached by a professional coach the most valuable of the entire course, both for professional and personal reasons. Bruce describes:

[Coaching] was probably one of the best things that I've actually been through. [My coach] was a great aspiration, she's an excellent coach, and it gave me a real opportunity to reflect on my practices, how I behave and again, my values, and to really be able to prioritise my own personal values and work round them, understand myself better, so that I could be a more effective worker. She was really inspirational, ... really good to talk to, and again, very, very empowering. She was very acute in how she questioned me, and she just fully empowered me, ... just giving me an insight into myself, so yeah, it was brilliant. ... I just thought, if I could do, use the same practices or similar practices, with my, well not just with my work colleagues, but more with the people with which I worked, that would be a real benefit.

Bruce's account suggests that knowledge of coaching theories, tools and techniques is not enough to fully understand what coaching is about. He experienced the power of coaching first hand and wanted to replicate the empowerment he received from his coach with his client families. Like Bruce, other participants stressed the value of being able to discuss difficulties at work or in their private lives with somebody who could both support and challenge them in their learning on the course, their daily client work and beyond. The experience of being coached provided participants with a completely new way of looking at themselves, their role and their daily work that has a lasting positive effect on their lives.

Our analysis suggests that the development of heightened self-awareness often associated with coaching (e.g. Silsbee 2008) may very well have contributed to the depth of the learning experienced by the team members. The coaching element on the course combined knowledge of coaching theories, tools and technique with the experience of being coached, both of which is practical, relevant and transferable to other situations. The support that team members received from their coach is something that they can give not only to their client families but also to other team members. Victoria reflects on the support within the team as follows:

I enjoyed the coaching, because sometimes I can get into a bit of a low and need that bit of an extra push, just to keep me on task, so I enjoyed that. ... Our job is quite tough and its mentally exhausting, ... so it's good when we're altogether and we can go back to the office and say "well this has happened and that's

happened” and we’ve all got an understanding of what we’re going through.

The shared experience of coaching allows team members to share the struggles of their daily work and to support one another in a fashion that is similar to the concept of ‘supervision’ commonly used in psychological practice. Our analysis also suggests that the regular sharing of struggles strengthened team members’ bond with one another and supports their often difficult work with client families.

Learning environment

Participants stressed the importance of the learning environment and of the course taking place at a nearby university. They recalled sharing a car to get to university, which helped them to get to know each other better and to bond as a team, as Eve reflects:

I think we wouldn’t have been as bonded as we are, because we all came [to university] together in the same car and things like that, because when you are working, you don’t do that.

Travelling to university was time outside of work and outside of study, which provided team members with a different kind of space to interact, ‘to make friendships, understand what each other was doing, understand what our [individual] role was within the team and who everybody was’, as Keira called it. It became the basis for social interaction that would otherwise have been much more difficult to establish and maintain,

despite attempts to do so, as Nina explains: *I think it's about constantly making sure that you take time out, that it's not just all about work, and I think one of the things that we have done is that we make sure that we have regular development sessions. We've set up the team meetings and now we have one team meeting and then two weeks later we set up another team meeting and it will just be a development session where the team get together and we might be looking at some piece of work or research or looking at assessments of people's roles, but generally it's two hours just for people to sit and relax and have a chat and get together and air out anything that has been niggling people or anything like that. So I think giving people time away to be together as opposed to the hectic in and out [of daily routines], you know ships that pass in the night kind of scenario that happens in your day to day work that creates that bond that team unity I suppose that time to get together.*

The university setting has also had an impact on team members as it provided space for participants to talk about their behaviour and daily routines – things for which they are normally too busy and which was seen as a significant contributing factor to the gelling of the team, as Bruce recalled:

I think us coming out as a team and in that setting of the university itself, just in a neutral environment really helped us.

Our analysis suggests that the context in which learning takes place is a significant and undervalued source and contribution to the learning experience of adult, work-based students (Jarvis 1987 as cited in Merriam *et al.* 2007). Yet, when environment is discussed in the educational literature, it usually refers to the immediate teaching and learning environment, i.e. the rooms in which a group is which is taught and what kind of technology is available. The experiences of the participants in our research demonstrate the importance of the space for getting to know each other – a space that is unrelated to work and unrelated to study – which appears to have had a major impact on the ability of the team to bond, to support and encourage each other, and to outperform other teams in their department. Knowledge and experience of coaching (as discussed above) may have given the course participants the reflective capacity to become aware of the role of the learning environment and express it in the interview.

Content

Discussions about content are at the heart of course design (Shulman 1987), particularly bespoke vocational courses that have to have practical relevance and applicability. The content of this course focused on learning style, team role theory, problem-based learning and coaching aimed at developing participants and giving them skills and tools to interact with their client families more effectively. It provided participants with an opportunity to analyze their way of working, the interaction among the team and their own role in the team, encouraging them to observe similar patterns within their client families. The course introduced the group to some of the basics of team roles and team dynamics and as Keira summarized:

It helped us make friendships, understand what each other are doing, understand what our kind of role is within the team and who everybody is so I thought it really helped with that.

She goes on to say:

I think it's recognizing other people, how other people work, and how other people like their role in a team and who wants to sit back and who's the one that talks the most and things like that. I don't think I have ever really specifically talked about people's roles in a team before, even though I kind of knew it, I haven't had time to sit back and think, "hmm you're that", and also seeing people identifying that and what their strengths were and things like that. So I think listening to people's open and honesty and talking, "well I think I'm this, I think I'm that and things like that", I thought that was really good.

Keira's account focuses on an increased awareness of herself and of the other team members facilitated through the use of theory. She has become more aware of each team member's impact on and contribution to the team, creating profound respect for one another. Rather than act intuitively, course participants can now analyze their own role within their team and find novel solutions to any issues more easily. More importantly for their daily work, team members can transfer such skills to the client families that they are supporting and help them find new solutions to any problems in a more equal and respectful relationship, as Ivan described:

It's about doing it diplomatically and not going in [to a family] like you're the expert. It's about bringing [the client] on board, I always say, we are going to do this, we are going to sort this out, not me, certain things I say that's your responsibility, certain things are my responsibility, but as a whole, talking about the case in general, so I'm on board with them and they're on board with me, a partnership really.

The acquisition of new knowledge has allowed Ivan and his colleagues to reconceptualize the relationship with the client families they are seeking to support. Our research participants' account suggest more respect for the situation in which the families find themselves in and for more involvement of the families in resolving any problems that they may be facing to transform their lives for the better.

Teaching and Learning Methods

Like content, teaching and learning methods are at the heart of course design, and the use of multiple methods is often regarded as vital to ensure the engagement of a wide variety of learners with the course and its content (Ausburn 2004). Formal classroom sessions were used to introduce theories, models and techniques as well as to discuss their applicability and relevance as well as more general perceptions of participants. Group work was a key element aimed at strengthening the ties participants had with each (team building) other while personal development planning and reflective learning sought to address the participants' development needs.

Team members explained how the course differed from other training that was widely offered by the local authority and they stressed the interplay of personal learning and professional relevance. Manager Nina, who also participated in the course, explains:

It wasn't a training event, it wasn't a training day, it wasn't strictly, you know, a substance misuse course that gives you all these tools, it was something that people took a bit for themselves personally or also a lot professionally as well.

Nina's comment reflects a feeling that is widely shared among team members: the feeling that the course was more than just professional development. It seems that the course simultaneously supported their personal development as well as their professional development, as Peter's account demonstrates:

It provided us with the tools that kind of systematically got you to look at whatever those areas were on how to improve things or benefit from this and I've found that I've used it in again lots of different settings. My job at the time of starting the course was very much a frontline role with families and children. I changed role in between that, but I found that the skills I got at the start of the course and all the way through I was using again on a day to day level when my job had changed.

Peter focuses on the transferability of knowledge and skills as well as applicability to a range of situations arising in his professional practice. Our analysis suggests that the applicability and transferability of the knowledge and skills gained on the course has contributed to the superior performance of the STEP team, as discussed below. But there is another angle to this, as Ivan describes:

I think because you were able to personalize [the learning], it gave you that motivation to learn a lot more to actually take a lot more on board.

Ivan suggests that the personal nature of the learning on the course (which, we suggest, is partly due to its coaching element) enhanced his motivation to study and subsequently his performance on the course and beyond.

The challenge for management educators, therefore, is to make a course relevant to professional practice (applicability) as well as the development needs of the individuals (personalization). Such transformative learning as experienced by the team members involves the process whereby learners explore their own identity, sense of self and subjectivity. Dirks (2001), for instance, suggests integrating experiences in the outer world, experiences of text and subject matter, and their impact on the inner world. The course was designed in a way that allowed the students to apply the content to their own working environment.

While practical relevance and applicability have always been at the heart of vocational education (e.g. Shulman 1987), there seems to have been an assumption

that course content is being gradually build into participants' daily routines. The course differed from the substance misuse course quoted above, for instance, in that the content related both to participants' daily routines and their personal / professional development. Our analysis suggests that coaching may be one means of making learning relevant to participants at an individual level, while also allowing the shared learning among a team.

Discussion: *Did all of that make them perform better?*

Any learning intervention needs to be judged according to the initial learning objectives. In this case, these learning objectives were (1) team building and (2) participants' professional development. Our analysis provided in the previous section suggests that coaching has a role in the overall learning experience on a vocational course. In particular, coaching seems to constitute the bridge between team development, personal development and professional practice: it is intensely personal yet shared among team members and relevant to their daily client work. In short, coaching seemed to be the part of the course that had a transformational impact on participants.

With regard to team building, manager Nina reflected:

I strongly believe that had I not done that particular course at that time, then the team would be very much fragmented still. I don't think that people wouldn't have formed as a unit but they wouldn't necessarily be working as a team if that makes sense. The biggest thing for me was to see how the team formed and

then continued to develop as a team into a very strong unit. It doesn't matter how or what happens, they'll always stick together.

This bond about which Nina is talking can be observed by the example of one team member who left the immediate team just after finishing the course to work in a different role in the children's services department. Yet, this team member is still regarded as an integral part of the team and continues to be consulted (and continues to consult) other members of the team in professional matters. When challenged about whether this was due to personality or personal characteristics, all participants shook their heads: Personality and personal characteristics may be one aspect in their team, but they associated their strong bond, their interaction and performance to the four elements of learning on the course –coaching, environment, content, and teaching and learning methods as discussed above (see also Figure 1).

What is more important for the purposes of this paper, however, is to understand whether management educators can learn from the experiences of the team members when writing similar bespoke courses. This requires deeper analysis and discussion of the research findings. The course enabled participants to learn individually, to learn as a team and to relate to their professional practice. Hence, learning on the course took place at different levels, as summarized in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In terms of coaching, course participants shared the knowledge of coaching and the experience of being coached, with the latter being intensely personal and constituting interaction with an individual external to their work and studies. In terms of environment, course participants had shared experience of travelling to university in a car and of attending classes in the university setting. They were able to interact with a new and for many different learning environment, which interacted with their assumptions and previous experiences. In terms of content, course participant shared knowledge of the same theories, tools and techniques, but applied it in line with their interpretations and relevance to their professional specialism. Finally, in terms of teaching and learning methods, group work fostered interaction among team members and with the programme leader, while personal development planning allowed for personalization of the learning experience.

The findings suggest that both the relationship between the four elements and the three levels at which participants have learned allowed them to perform to a high standard. It has already been discussed how important both individual and team learning was to participants – the building of shared experiences as a basis for bonding and performance together with the opportunity to learn as individuals. What also seems to be important is the interaction with each other as well as others; learning is a social affair that made the participants' learning deeper and more personal. It was a transformational experience for most of them.

Moreover, it is interesting that participants provide a clear causal link between their learning on the course, the bonding between team members that it facilitated and the

team's superior performance (see also Figure 1). Superior performance, whether individual or team, is often one of the key expected outcomes of coaching (Downey 2003, Wilson 2007), yet it is rarely associated with learning on courses. There is not a compulsory link with learning and improved performance (learning can just be fun), but in an economic climate in which fewer resources are available for staff development, improved performance after study is imperative. But how can such performance improvement be brought about and measured? It is evident from the literature on coaching that the value to both participants and the organization is difficult to measure and often the value is better measured through qualitative means and the perception of the participants, i.e. narrative and the stories of the value to their learning and performance (Author 1).

Conclusion

Our research contributes to the current understanding of coaching in education and particularly on vocational courses for frontline staff. Four elements associated with the course under investigation have been identified by participants are pivotal in supporting their learning: coaching, learning environment, course content, and teaching and learning methods. While these four elements are important aspects of vocational education, their relationship alluded to in our discussion above allowed the team to bond effectively and achieve superior performance.

Without exception the value of the coaching experience to their individual and collective learning was singled out by participants as the most significant element of the course. Our research challenges educators of adult learners to provide opportunities for social interaction with other participants and the wider learning

environment as well as for personalized learning through advanced development measures like coaching. Coaching can make a significant contribution to work-based learning due to the heightened levels of self-awareness that it creates within the adult learner. The power of the shared experience of learning helped to create the team identity and sense of belonging among the team members which strengthens the argument for communities of practice as part of the learning environment.

(6,404 words)

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Figure 1: Four elements facilitating participants' learning

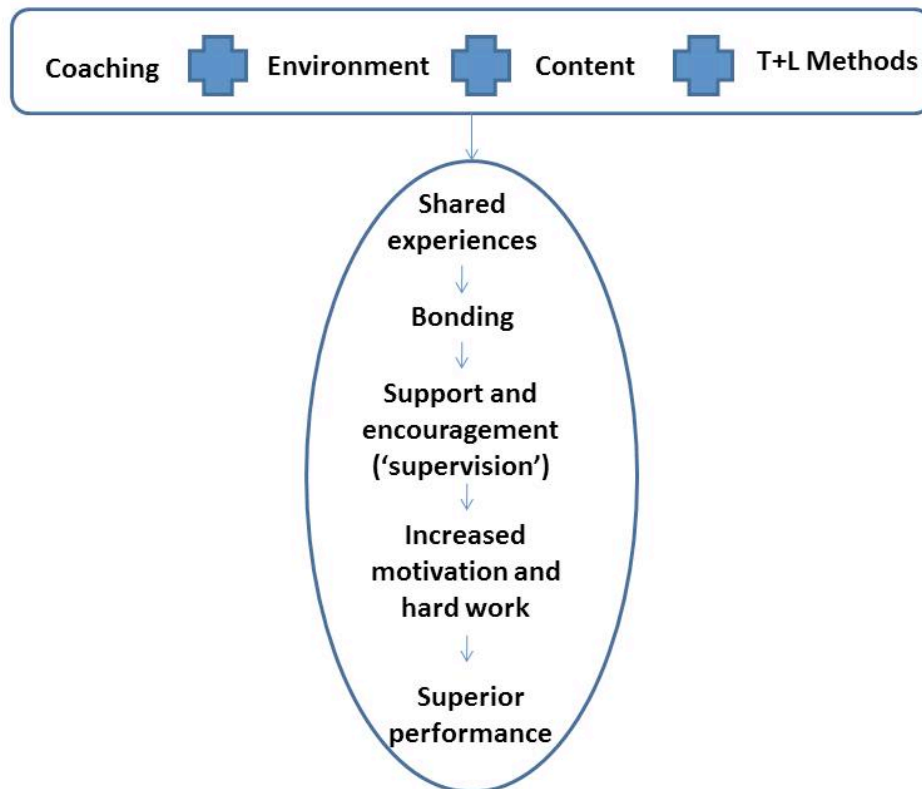


Table 1: Levels of learning

Coaching	Environment	Content	T+L Methods
Shared experience of being coached	Shared experiences among team members	Shared knowledge among team members	Group work to foster team learning
Individual coaching session with professional coach	Individual perceptions of university setting	Individual interpretation and relevance of content	Personal development planning and reflective learning for personal development
Interaction with external professional coach	Interaction with learning environment (space)	Interaction with professional practice (relevance)	Interaction with self, peers and academics

ⁱ This is a pseudonym to protect the research participants' identities, and all other names have also been changed.